

# THE DARK WAY

Martin Butler

# WHY A DARK WAY

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The Dark Way is dark because it requires that we look at those things within ourselves that we would rather not look at. The way of love and light is usually nothing more than an ego trip, a flight of fancy into a world that is not real but gives temporary relief from the realities of life.

This way is dark because it demands we look at the “beast” that is within all of us. Only by understanding this beast in ourselves and others can we understand the world. We cannot tame the beast, destroy it, or bring it under our control in any way, because to all intents and purposes we are the beast. However through understanding we mitigate some of its harmful effects on ourselves and on others.

The reason we continue to exist is thanks to the beast. The reason we suffer is thanks to the beast. In the simplest terms the beast is the survival drive. It dominates everything and it ensures that in nearly all circumstances we will put our own interests before those of others, even when we seem not to be.

The beast is a liar, a cheat, an egoist and if circumstances dictate, it can be cruel and malicious. Not very flattering is it. Which is why most people will seek “love and light” because it means they do not have to see what they really are. So despite decades of “love and light” nothing has changed. Some would say that bigotry, cruelty, phony behavior, deceitfulness and many other delicacies have increased. As long as we avoid staring into the pit of our own being and instead deny, so nothing is going to change, either for the individual or for society as a whole.

It sounds as if the whole exercise might be an invitation to unending misery - but not so. Through understanding we diminish the effects that the beast has on our own being. We create just a small amount of separation between it and our everyday consciousness, so that we are not pulled and pushed around by its whims. And most importantly we do not deny its existence and pretend that we are kind loving people - a scenario that will only produce neurosis and unwanted side-effects (spitefulness, jealousy, sarcasm etc).

This short book is structured so that it does some scene setting and then moves on to describe how the beast operates and the harmful effects it produces. We then move on to suggest some practices that should, performed with skill, deliver us from the tyranny of the beast.

# AGAINST LIFE

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All creatures are driven to continue with their existence - a phenomenon known as the survival instinct. The problem with calling it an instinct is the implication that living beings are more than their desire to survive. They are not. Every aspect of all forms of life serve this desire to continue existing. Existence is its own final cause, or the reason every creature will surmount almost any obstacle to continue with its existence. Life is the ultimate addiction and there is no known cure, although nature delivers its own verdict on each life by sentencing it to death the second it is conceived. The evidence would suggest that nature does everything it can to ensure the diversity and volume of life, but has no regard for the individual. If this is accepted we can only conclude that for any given individual nature will drive it to continue with its existence, but also sentence it to death. This inbuilt conflict sets the scene for a great deal of suffering.

For all life forms apart from man there seems to be a blissful ignorance of anything other than immediate desires and their satisfaction. When an animal is feasting on another it does not experience pleasure, it is pleasure. The same when it is dying slowly from an infected wound. It is not experiencing pain, it is the pain. For man however it is different. His reflective consciousness means he can contemplate his own end, and can consciously experience suffering and pain. This reflective consciousness has proved itself to be the most successful survival mechanism nature has produced. It acts as a desire amplifier, taking the desires that are inherent in the body and amplifying them so they are satisfied. The net result is that our minds become anxious as the desires proliferate and become amplified. Anxiety is the natural state for our minds, and it ensures our survival needs are heeded and acted upon. Our minds are the slave of the body, listening to its desires and then planning and executing the best course of action to see they are satisfied.

In the human experience this means we strive to equip ourselves with the skills to thrive in life. We become educated and seek the most lucrative form of employment so we can acquire food, shelter, and a suitable nesting environment for raising children. For most people the ultimate aim of all this striving is to produce the next generation. The sex drive is so strong in the young that virtually all activity is geared toward finding sexual partners and establishing an environment for breeding. But all of this comes at a cost - continuous anxiety, with the mind striving to ensure the most viable form of survival. On top of this operational anxiety is existential anxiety - the knowledge that we will die.

Pleasure and pain are fundamental drivers. When our survival prospects are enhanced we feel pleasure, when they are diminished we feel pain. Pleasure and pain act as the navigating compass for the body - it tries to avoid pain, and strives after pleasure. In parallel with the body's pleasure and pain are corresponding thoughts. Our minds are busily conjuring up thoughts that are pleasurable and in denial about things that are painful. In this respect the mind amplifies the relatively simple needs of the body and creates fantastic images of untold wealth, rampant sexual activity, power beyond measure and widespread approval from others. In the less intelligent these images will cause untold misery, since the associated desires are insatiable. The more intelligent person may see these fantasies for what they are and try to moderate them. Only the rare individual will understand what is going on here: that the mind is simply amplifying the desires and insecurities of the body, and as such the fantasies can be ignored - or even laughed at.

Animals experience pain and distress just as human beings do. However man is unique in being able to amplify his desire for existence and reflect consciously on the dangers in life. If we are going to deal effectively with the desire amplifier called the brain, we need to get a good perspective on how it affects us, and come to understand how its excessive activity can be calmed, and as a direct result, reduce our anxieties.

However, we do need to heed a word of warning. Our survival instinct has evolved over millions of years. Mankind is demonstrably the most successful species on Earth because of its over-active brain. Every desire is amplified and will nag until met. It gives us no peace. Trying to moderate the survival drive requires skill. It is much stronger than we might first consider. If a person was to observe their thoughts throughout the day they would find they are dominated by schemes and plans to achieve what the body demands - more money, more sex, more food, greater fame and on and on. If we think we can stop this awful machine from going about its business we are very mistaken. The best we can do is moderate its anxiety producing effects so that life becomes more pleasurable. This requires skill and great understanding. Any attempt to subjugate this beast called the survival drive will be met with resistance, greater misery, and even more damaging desires.

The endless desire for wealth, fame, material comforts, sex and entertainment all come from a survival drive that is out of control. Achieving some measure of inner peace means turning a blind eye to the crass consumerism our age. It should be clear by now that the task ahead, The Dark Way, is not a trivial undertaking and has pitfalls of its own. Most religions and so called spiritual traditions tell us we should be loving, kind, compassionate, generous and exercise these and other virtues, but they make one mistake - they underestimate the power of the beast - the survival drive. The Dark Way is against life - against the ravages of the survival drive that causes so much misery. For this reason we should not expect it to be without dangers - life will always fight back.

*Egoism is colossal: it towers above the world - Schopenhauer*

# THE SURVIVAL PROGRAM

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From the minute you wake until the minute you go to sleep your survival program is running. The brain is instructed on what the body needs, and as its faithful servant it spends the waking hours busying itself with getting them. We work to earn money, and maybe to gain prestige, we shop for food, establish suitable habitation, socialize to establish a support network. Our days are filled with activities of this nature, and our brains figure out the most effective way to get what the body demands. For many people the survival program is the only program that is running and they would question any activity that is not part of this program. More reflective types might find pleasures in things that are not directly linked with survival - art, philosophy and hobbies of various kinds.

Our daily waking consciousness is what we call "I". During sleep, and particularly deep dreamless sleep, this "I" disappears. Such is the energy that is consumed by the brain in its activities, and the anxieties that are produced, that the body demands the brain rests for several hours each day. The body itself does not rest - digestion continues, as does blood circulation and the functioning of the organs. Schopenhauer understood this very well when he said:

*"The brain, together with the nerves and spinal cord attached to it, is a mere fruit, a product, in fact a parasite, of the rest of the organism, in so far as it is not directly geared to the organism's inner working, but serves the purpose of self-preservation by regulating its relations with the external world."*

The brain collects data from the senses, forms ideas and uses those ideas to navigate life. All the time it is doing this it is overlooked by its master - the body. If the body is hungry the brain figures out how to get food, and if the body wants sex then the brain will devise schemes of seduction. As Schopenhauer states, our brain is tasked with "regulating relations with the external world" because the body cannot do it itself.

*A man will give up almost anything except his suffering - Gurdjieff*

# I SUFFER

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What is this mysterious "I" that "spiritual" folk talk about? It's a difficult thing to locate, and yet during our waking hours we have a definite sense of "me", of being someone. That this mysterious "I" is not a permanent feature of our being is demonstrated every time we sleep, and particularly in deep dreamless sleep. Where is the cherished and much debated "I" then? It disappears and for all intents and purposes we do not exist as an "I". This rather embarrassing fact is overlooked by the "love and light" brigade, eager to find something they can hang on to to satisfy their egotistical desire for permanence.

Every night the body demands that the brain switches off for several hours. Such is the energy consumption of the brain, and its constant state of anxiety, that it needs to rest and regroup for the coming day. In deep dreamless sleep we do not suffer. We have no pain, no worries and no anxiety. Plato had something to say about this state:

*"Now, if death is without all sensation, a dreamless sleep, as it were, it would be indeed a wonderful gain. For I think if anyone selected a night in which he had slept so soundly as to have no dream, and then compared this night with other nights and days of his life, and after serious consideration declared how many days and nights he had spent better and more pleasantly than this one, that not merely ordinary mortal, but the great king of Persia himself, would find these but a few in number as compared with all his other days and nights."*

Our body requires that our brain establishes an "I", an ego - a sense of me. Without it we would not strive so valiantly to persist in our existence, and we would be like a ship without an anchor, wasting large amounts of time trying to establish context. And so we have memory to give us a sense of continuity, and we have a map of the body that is produced in the brain stem. When we wake in the morning we immediately know who we are. If this map becomes physically damaged a person loses a sense of self.

This famous "I" is a waking hours construct that allows us to navigate the world successfully. But because of the demands of the body this "I" suffers. It is always anxious, continually scheming and planning so that the body's needs are met. It is also inherently neurotic, since we are intelligent enough to know that all our efforts will eventually come to naught - we will die. How can we make the "I" happy, since this is our primary task?

*Heaven is heartless, and treats all things as straw dogs - Lao Tsu*

# THE DARK WAY

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If we want relief from the tyranny of the beast, the survival drive, we need to consider its mode of operation and then look at their opposites. Here is a list of several attributes we can assign to the functioning of the beast:

- Desire - Every second of our waking day is driven by desire, and the mother of all desires is the desire to exist. If a person can watch their thoughts for just a minute they will find they are always driven by a desire, an ambition. These thoughts and the anxiety they produce give us no peace.
- Light - There is no activity without energy, and we will use the word "light" to denote all forms of energy that support activity. Most animals are active during the day busily satisfying the body's needs. Nearly all plants need sunlight to grow, and human beings generally spend their daylight hours scheming, planning, working and actively acquiring the resources they need to continue with their survival.
- Haste - Since the body's desires are inexhaustible we find ourselves constantly driven by the need to complete one task so we can move on to the next. Haste and ambition are the mark of the beast and they destroy our quality of life. We are never here - we are always working for some future goal. Life flashes past without us ever enjoying the moment.
- Activity - The beast only knows activity. The need for movement is programmed into our bodies - into every muscle fibre. So we fidget, we are restless, and some people need to work out in a gym to dispose of this restlessness.
- Noise - Activity generates noise - inner and outer. At a mundane level this might be the noise of traffic, the noise in an office, the noise of chattering birds, barking dogs. But it is the inner noise that is most damaging. The continual inner dialogue that figures out how we can do things to our best advantage. How we might impress someone, reduce our spending, what to have for dinner, plans for a dream vacation, whether we can afford that new house. This is all anxiety producing and is a product of our over-active brains, always figuring out the best way to ensure survival.

Desires, activity, haste, noise, energy expenditure, all take their toll, and are the breeding ground for anxiety. Let's consider the opposites.



First the bad news. For all intents and purposes we are the beast. Our daytime waking consciousness is merely a slave of the beast, but since this consciousness is what we call "I", we need to find ways to give "ourselves" some relief from its tyrannies. Here are the opposites to the way of the beast:

- Desire-less - This is not possible, but what is possible is to watch the desires. The understanding that comes from seeing them lessens their power.
- Dark - When people meditate they usually close their eyes to blank out visual distractions, and they also prefer silence. Darkness comes when energy diminishes. The night is often (unfortunately not always) a time of less energy, a time when the beast allows us to rest.
- Slow - Since we are addicted to desires and their manifestation through ambition we can only mitigate their effects for a short time. The haste that is associated with ambition can be checked for brief periods by simply performing a task with less haste.
- Relaxation - Since our natural state is activity, it requires skill to relax. Trying to relax is an oxymoron. When we are trying we are not relaxing. The key to relaxation is to simply watch the tension!
- Silence - Outer silence can be procured by finding a suitable location, but inner silence is a much rarer commodity. Once again, we can encourage inner silence by simply observing the noise in our heads.

This is a simple outline, and enough for anyone interested in a more pleasurable existence, to at least start down this path. In reality we also need to observe our emotional states, since there is no peace while emotions are on the rampage. But that is a whole other story.



# DESIRE-LESS

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Let's be realistic about this. We *are* desire. The beast is desire, and even the desire to be desire-less is a curse. But there is a way out. Instead of trying to diminish our desires, we just let them be. For short periods we can simply sit and observe our desires without trying to interfere or judge them. This is a simple idea but very difficult to execute. The beast will always rear its head, and we will want to judge what we are seeing, or modify our behavior in some way. Any attempt to modify behavior is simply the beast.

This sort of work requires a great deal of inner honesty since most of us are in deep denial about our desires. People who influenced when we were young may well have censored some of our behavior and as a result we censor ourselves. Maybe we were told that it was wrong to be angry, or that we should not be spiteful. These are natural expressions of the beast, and the ability to sit easily with them is quite difficult. This does not mean we randomly follow every whim that arises within us, and particularly ones that would cause harm to others. We are however allowed to acknowledge these desires without judgement. Even simple desires such as the sudden urge to have a coffee, phone a friend, browse our emails, and so on, can simply be observed.

## DESIRE OBSERVATION

Find a time during the day when you will not be disturbed for five or ten minutes. Make sure you are relaxed (a couple of deep breathes with a slow out breath will help), and start to register the thoughts as they pass through your mind. Many people find that the thoughts stop when they try to watch them, but it is just a matter of practice to be able to observe while they run their course. Typically you will find conversations going on within your mind - maybe recalling past conversations with people or imagining conversations you will have. Trivial thoughts come into mind - whether to have a different hair style, what a particular person might have thought about you, tasks you are eager to do and those you do not want to do. Just watch them. Do not interfere or judge. During this period you should just watch and not act on the desires and impulses that arise. You might find this frustrating - just observe it. Don't overdo this exercise or your beast will rebel, and we don't want that. Ten minutes a day is fine and is enough to develop an understanding of what is going on within you - and understanding is everything.

*Profound it is, dark and obscure - Lao Tsu*

# DARK

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As the sun goes down so nature winds down its activities and rest comes to many creatures. Daytime is full of frantic activity - mating, building habitat, establishing territory and dominance, killing for food. Light is nature's energizer, and without it the whole carnival of carnage would come to a grinding halt.

Darkness is a time we typically relax and wind down from the exertions of the day. The beast is not so happy when darkness comes and finds ways to exert its influence - nightclubs, dining out, socializing. Clearly these activities relate to mating and dominance, feeding and social context respectively - all of keen interest to the beast. Most of us will want to do things of this nature, but we should not completely waste the opportunity that nighttime brings - the opportunity to go into ourselves.

As with all these themes, none of this is of interest to the beast and so it will require a certain amount of effort. Strange that we should have to make efforts to bring ceaseless activity to an end, but activity is the language of nature and this work is against nature. All we are trying to do here is make our lives more pleasant, and nature has no interest this, so the effort has to be ours.

## DARK SITTING

Find a place that is quiet and dark. This might be a challenge for many people, but a bedroom is ideal. We just need ten minutes or so when we will be undisturbed. Sitting comfortably is best, but if there is no chair then lying down will suffice. Eyes should be open so we can "see" the darkness. We want to feel the peace and rest associated with the darkness, although thoughts will arise of their own accord. Simply acknowledge the thoughts and return to "seeing" the darkness. The body should be relaxed and a few deep breaths will help with this.

After the sitting bring your attention back to your ordinary life slowly. As with all these exercises ten minutes is enough. You will probably feel restless during your sitting in any case. Do not overdo it.

*When ambition ends, happiness begins - Thomas Merton*

# HASTE

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Ambition is the mark of the beast. Associated with every desire is an ambition, and this ambition causes us to seek to fulfill the desire. It is easy to know when ambition is driving us - we hurry. Haste is the curse associated with ambition and it ruins our experience of life. That people generally seem to be increasingly hasty illustrates very well that ambition is on the rise, and with it desire.

Examples of ambition abound. Rushing to catch a train is ambition. If there was no desire involved, we wouldn't rush. And it is worth reiterating that all desires spring from the one desire - the desire to persist in our existence. If the train is taking us to work, we will rush so that our livelihood is not threatened.

Ambition is obviously a generator of anxiety. Haste is the symptom of that anxiety as we rush toward some imagined future state of affairs and completely ignore the present. There is no way we can eliminate ambition from our lives, but we can take breaks from it. Our life is wholly driven by ambitions, large and small, and without ambition we could not exist. So it is not a matter of trying to eliminate ambition, but a matter of seeing it, and taking time out to rest from it.

Since haste is the direct manifestation of ambition we can expose our ambitions through a deliberate slowing down of what we are doing.

# SLOW

As I type this page I have an ambition - to finish this short book in the least time possible. This ambition becomes more visible as I slow down, and with that visibility I can think clearly about why I want to finish so quickly. Well, that's my business. But by seeing the ambition and desire behind the haste it becomes easier to slow down. Because after all, while everything matters to the beast, in reality nothing matters other than my pleasure right here and now, since this is all I have. The net result is that I become less anxious. My body becomes more relaxed and my mind does not race as much.

We can only do something like this for brief periods - but that is all that is needed. Simply pick a short task (10 minutes or so) and perform it more slowly than usual.

*The pleasures of wise men are relaxed - Seneca*

# RELAXATION

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Activity, tension, haste and ambition are all marks of the beast. Relaxation is common in the world of animals as they conserve their energy for the hunt, but we seem to have forgotten how necessary it is. This is a side effect of our over-anxious minds, our 24x7 survival drive completely unable to let go, even for a short period.

Ideally we need to find a way to relax both body and mind, although there is a catch. We cannot *try* to relax. By doing so we will probably become more tense. And so once again we simply observe our thoughts and bodily tensions. In any case, even if we successfully relax a part of our body, as soon as the attention moves away it will tense up again. Fritz Perls in his book Gestalt recognizes our need for relaxation:

*"There are occasions when it is appropriate to let go, grow hazy, and bask in animal comfort. That few of us can do this is a curse of our times - a consequence of "unfinished business" - but the ability to do so, which for the most part we know about only from envious watching of our house-hold tabby, is one that we can reacquire."*

The essence of the situation is that we have forgotten even simple animal pleasures because of our over-alert brains, always looking for the next threat, opportunity or way to distract ourselves from "unfinished business".

## DEATH POSE

The only yoga exercise I really liked was the death pose. It has a Sanskrit name, but I'll spare you the misery (besides which I can't remember it). We find a quiet place where we will not be disturbed for ten or fifteen minutes. Lay down on your back with arms and legs out straight. Hands should be six inches or so away from the torso and the feet separated by about a foot. We circulate our attention around the body, relaxing feet, legs, arms, hands, back, neck, shoulders - and so on. We do not "force" a relaxed state. Focus on your breathing - just watch it. At the same time sense the state of your body, moving the attention around various parts and simply registering their status. The shoulders are very often tense - leave them tense and just register. With repeated practice your body will learn to relax - and you probably will not want to come out of it.

# SILENCE

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Silence - both internal and external, consciously experienced, is the nearest thing to bliss. It assumes stillness, darkness and a quieting of the desires - which is why it is so rarely experienced.

It takes many forms. The simplest expression of silence is not to speak - to remain quiet when conditions allow. Generally speaking we are always trying to impress, to win an argument, to assert ourselves in some way. To have the presence such that we do not indulge in speaking, when normally we would, shows us immediately that much of it is unnecessary. This will not destroy our need to argue a point, boast, or talk simply to destroy the possibility of silence, but we will at least understand that much of our talking is quite mechanical.

Much more important however is inner silence. This will not happen until the desires have been calmed, and the only way the desires become calmed is by acknowledging the claims of the beast. These needs cannot be denied, and any attempt to do so will cause untold trouble - resentment, anger, envy, spitefulness. The beast will always find expression.

Inner silence, if it comes, is simply a gift. It isn't something we can achieve. The best we can do is observe the tumult that occupies our waking consciousness and acknowledge the thoughts and emotions that accompany it. We need to listen to what is going on within us without judgement, and positively acknowledge what we hear.

As an exercise we can set aside ten minutes or so and simply observe our thoughts and emotions. Easier said than done, but this is the best we can do. Sooner or later we may get a glimpse of inner silence, and that is all we need - just a glimpse. Cioran expresses it well:

*Silence is unbearable: what strength it takes to settle into the concision of the inexpressible!*

# OTHER RESOURCES

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Working alone is very difficult, and so there are other additional resources - some free and some requiring a financial contribution.

## FREE RESOURCES

The Corporeal Fantasy [Youtube](#) channel has over 150 podcasts on related topics.

The Martin Butler [Youtube](#) channel is where all new podcasts are being published.

The Martin Butler [website](#) with blog postings and excerpts from the great sages.

Free [books](#) of various lengths.

## OTHER RESOURCES

The [Patreon Channel](#) with in-depth analysis of the works of various sages.

[Mentoring](#) on a weekly basis with one of two qualified mentors.

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